

# Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford



## Fight to help pharmacists like Dipak struggling with their NHS contract

**H**APPY New Year! I never quite know how long is acceptable to keep on wishing people a happy new year, but my general rule of thumb is that if it's still January and this is the first time you've seen or spoken to someone (or written a newspaper column, perhaps), it's still OK.

Anyway, I hope you managed to have some fun and relaxation over the festive period and that 2025 is off to a good start.

Parliament returned from the Christmas recess on Monday and these next few weeks promise to be busy ones. There are lots of interesting Bills coming forward, not least the Private Member's Bill put forward by my fabulous Liberal Democrat colleague Roz Savage MP – the Climate & Nature Bill (otherwise known as the CAN Bill).

This will be debated in the House of Commons on Friday, January 24. You can find out more about the CAN Bill on the Zero Hour website here: [www.zerohour.uk/climate-and-nature-bill](http://www.zerohour.uk/climate-and-nature-bill). More about that in future columns.

My first week back after the Christmas break has proven to be even more interesting than I expected because yesterday (Wednesday, January 8) I got to ask my first ever question at Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs). (I'm going to put in a very big caveat here: publishing deadlines being what they are, I'm writing this on Sunday, January 5. It's entirely possible that things won't turn out as planned, so I'm afraid you'll just have to forgive me if that changes – it's all part of the rather unpredictable life of an MP!)

My question was about pharmacies and how some of them are really struggling because their contract with the NHS which pays them for the drugs they have to dispense no longer covers the cost of those drugs. As a result, many independent pharmacies are losing money and are having to dip into their savings to stay afloat. I don't think that's right and I asked the Prime Minister whether he agreed.

Let me tell you a bit more about what's going on.



Marie Goldman MP with Dipak Pau at The Pillbox Pharmacy, in Meadgate, Great Baddow

MARIE GOLDMAN MP

“Many independent pharmacies are losing money and are having to dip into their savings to stay afloat.”

Marie Goldman MP

First of all, pharmacies are a vital part of our health service. The chances are that everyone reading this column will, at some point in their life, have gone into a pharmacy either to pick up a prescription or to ask advice about what to take for a minor ailment.

Pharmacists are a fountain of knowledge. They have to go through years of training to qualify to do the job and they hold a wealth of information about different medicines.

Sometimes, pharmacists work for large companies, such as Boots, with lots of different branches around the country. But often they operate independently, opening their own pharmacies in our community. One of these independent pharmacists is Dipak Pau, whom I met for the first time just before Christmas.

Dipak first opened the doors to The Pillbox Pharmacy in Meadgate, Great Baddow, in 1991 and he's been serving the local community ever since. When I visited him, it was clear how much his patients value him just from the huge pile of Christmas presents he and his staff had received, stacked up behind the counter.

I could also tell how much Dipak cares about his patients, as he greeted so many of them by name as they came through the door while I was there.

But Dipak is struggling. Not only does his NHS contract no longer cover the cost of the drugs it obliges him to buy and dispense, but in some notable cases it is way off the mark.

Take, for example, Aripiprazole. Aripiprazole ([www.nhs.uk/medicines/aripiprazole](http://www.nhs.uk/medicines/aripiprazole)) is a drug used to treat mental health conditions, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Dipak tells me that patients taking the drug as prescribed by their doc-

tor can find their symptoms much more manageable, ultimately keeping them from having to be admitted for costly stays in hospital and special mental health facilities, and thereby saving the NHS money.

Dipak used to be able to buy Aripiprazole for £1/unit. His NHS contract used to pay him £1.37/unit, leaving him with 37p/unit to cover his overheads and put towards his and his staff's wages. Fair enough, I would say. I hope you agree.

But a short while ago, Aripiprazole became difficult to get hold of and, as the laws of supply and demand dictate, the cost went up. In fact, it skyrocketed. Instead of costing £1/unit, it started costing £138/unit – and no, I'm not missing a decimal point, it really was costing Dipak over 100 times more per unit than he was being reimbursed.

A pharmacist's contract with the NHS doesn't allow them much flexibility. If a drug is available to buy from a wholesaler, pharmacists are contractually obliged to buy it, even if they know they will have to dispense it at a loss, and even if that loss per unit is eye-wateringly big.

The good news is that the cost of Aripiprazole has now calmed down and the NHS contract payment has been upped to be closer to what pharmacists are having to pay. The bad news is that this is nowhere near the only drug that is making pharmacists lose money.

Another example is Methylphenidate. Methylphenidate ([www.nhs.uk/medicines/methylphenidate-adults](http://www.nhs.uk/medicines/methylphenidate-adults)) is a drug used to treat ADHD. There is a worldwide supply problem. Dipak currently buys packs of 54mg tablets for £73.62. The NHS payment is just £36.80. Dipak dispensed 16 packs of this in one month – at a loss on this drug alone of £589.12.

This is an issue that is affecting pharmacists across the country and clearly it can't continue. Many pharmacies are in real danger of having to close if it isn't fixed. So I'm pushing the Government for action.

I've got the ball rolling by raising it directly with the Prime Minister, but I've also started a petition. I'd be really grateful if you'd sign it to help me raise the profile of this important issue that could, quite literally, be the difference between life and death for patients.

Please sign my petition here: [www.cmlid.org.uk/sop](http://www.cmlid.org.uk/sop)

Thanks for reading.

Marie